

Testimony before the Education Committee, March 10, 2008
Alex Johnston, Executive Director, ConnCAN

Senator Gaffey, Representative Fleischmann and members of the Committee, thank you for the opportunity to testify before you today. My name is Alex Johnston and I am the Executive Director of ConnCAN, the Connecticut Coalition for Achievement Now.

As many of you know, ConnCAN has been working with a variety of partner organizations to advocate for the "Great Schools for All Plan" as a set of five elements that working together will create a fly-wheel that builds momentum behind self-sustaining changes in the way Connecticut's public schools are both supported and held accountable for results:

1. **Guarantee that every low-income family** in Connecticut has a choice of free high-quality preschools for their children to reduce the achievement gap before they enter school.
2. **Triple the number of innovative new public schools** in our urban districts so that children with differing needs have a wealth of high-quality options, and new ideas for raising student achievement are given fertile ground in which to grow.
3. **Dramatically expand the pipeline of teacher and principal "All-Stars"** into city schools to place the highest-caliber educators in the areas of highest need.
4. **Help districts implement best practices** for raising achievement system-wide so that best practice becomes common practice in all our public schools.
5. **Ensure much greater financial transparency** and public accountability for results to better track student progress and increase the resources that go directly to improving instruction.

Last year the General Assembly enacted a number of pieces of legislation that significantly advanced these initiatives—from funding for unique student identifiers, expanding access to pre-K, allowing for charter school expansion and the creation of CommPACT schools to expanding the State Department of Education's capacity to help struggling districts improve their performance.

Today I'd like to testify on several bills before the Committee that will take further steps to close Connecticut's worst-in-the-nation achievement gap.

On HB 5870, An Act Concerning Minor Changes to the Education Statutes: This bill takes a valuable step forward in recognizing the importance of schools reaching out to build partnerships with their students' families. Last year the General Assembly passed legislation giving the State Department of Education an enhanced role in helping districts designated "in need of improvement" to develop and implement turnaround plans. This bill would add an additional tool to the kit when constructing these turnaround plans by creating a survey of parents, teachers and administrators focused on issues of school climate providing actionable data for enhancing the partnership between schools and families in ways that benefit student achievement—something that other states have started doing to great effect, and which the Goal 2 Working Group of the Governor's Early Childhood Cabinet has recently recommended for adoption here in Connecticut. My organization has created a catalogue of "Success Stories" profiling the best practices of the highest performing "gap-closing" public schools across the state. You can see these for yourself through the videos up on our website at www.conncan.org. One of the common findings across all these

high performing schools is that their school leaders and teachers have undertaken major efforts to engage parents in creative, new ways, as partners in their children's learning. This bill would help identify, through a readily accessible set of data, those schools which are making breakthroughs in this arena of parental engagement, as well as providing critical insight into how to overcome the barriers to parental engagement in those schools where parents are not as fully engaged.

On SB 649, An Act Concerning School Learning Environments: This bill is very much mutually reinforcing with the school climate survey concept outlined in HB 5870. SB 649 proposes an initiative for the State Department of Education to strengthen its role in fostering the adoption of best practices for developing positive school climates, building on the excellent work of James Comer. It seems to make perfect sense that if SDE is going to create a school climate training program for educators we should also at the same time develop an instrument to measure the impact of these efforts, and the school climate surveys proposed in HB 5870 would do exactly that.

On HB 5871, An Act Concerning the Best Program: Providing extensive coaching and support to new teachers, particularly those serving in our state's highest need schools is critical. We have major problems with teacher retention in many high needs districts, and there is no shortage of evidence that mentorships, when properly conceived and executed, can make a significant difference in developing the skills of new teachers and encouraging them to stay in teaching during those difficult first few years. It's also clear that the BEST program as it is currently operating is not fully realizing this promise, and it certainly makes sense to consider ways that this important program could be strengthened and revamped. While this bill takes an important step in calling for an overhaul of the BEST program, it moves too quickly to reduce the role of the State Department of Education in this arena. Many are understandably frustrated that here in Connecticut, the state with the nation's largest achievement gap, the BEST program and other initiatives overseen by the State Department of Education are not functioning better—but we have only to look to the example of other states that have made dramatic progress in closing their achievement gaps, such as Massachusetts, to see that strong central state education agencies play a critical role in these states' success stories. Hence, as we move forward to revamp the BEST program we need to do so in a way that enhances, rather than weakens, the role and the capacity of the State Department of Education as the appropriate coordinating authority on a statewide level.

On SB 647, An Act Concerning Charter Schools: This bill proposes bringing charter school funding up to the average funding level of other kinds of public schools as well as making several other adjustments to the statute that would facilitate the measured growth of schools with a demonstrated track record of success. Let me be clear, we do not see charter schools as the cure-all solution to Connecticut's achievement gap in a state where there are more than 150,000 students below grade level and only 4500 charter school students. But we do think it makes perfect sense to foster the conditions in Connecticut where schools with an outstanding track record for raising student achievement have sufficient funding within an appropriate framework of regulation and accountability so that they can continue to grow at pace with their capacity to deliver life-changing results for their students.